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# Commentary on van rees

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**In Response to:** M. Agnes Van Rees' *Argumentative functions of dissociation in every-day discussions*

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Van Rees has provided us with a very interesting paper. Using the pragma-dialectical framework, she offers a careful close analysis of the ways in which the technique of dissociation can be used dialogically to deal with opinion conflicts. The analysis is quite insightful and very stimulating. In this commentary I want to offer some observations about the larger project of understanding dissociation and (in the spirit of that project) offer a few more examples.

Dissociation is not all that clear an idea. As van Rees points out, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's treatment of dissociation is not as lucid as one might like; "conceptual clarification of the notion of dissociation" is indeed a task that needs addressing. But the paper chooses to sidestep the question of exactly what dissociation is, in favor of analyzing some ways in which dissociation is used.

Naturally this invites a certain line of criticism. One might well think that the task of conceptual clarification would somehow have to precede any discussion of the argumentative functions of dissociation. After all, one can't very well discuss such functions unless one can identify cases of dissociation—which presumably requires having some worked-out concept of dissociation. Hence (it might be thought) the paper's project is somehow badly flawed.

The paper argues (very briefly) that such a concern is misplaced, and I agree—but not for the reasons that the paper offers. The paper explicitly "leave[s] the matter of conceptual clarification aside," and defends this way of proceeding by arguing that "Even though the boundaries between distinction and dissociation are not clear, in the context of an argument, both techniques may be used in the same way" (and, since the current interest is in how the dissociation technique is used, any distinctions between dissociation and distinction become irrelevant).

This does not seem to me to be an entirely satisfactory way of defending the paper's enterprise. In order to support the claim that distinction and dissociation may be used in the same way in arguments, one presumably will want to be able to say "here are some identifiable cases that plainly involve distinction, and here is how distinction is used in these cases; and here are some identifiable cases involving dissociation--cases that are demonstrably different from cases of distinction in specifiable ways--and here is how dissociation is used in these cases; and so here is the obvious parallelism in how distinction and dissociation are used in argument." But this will require having a sufficiently clear treatment of distinction and dissociation so as to be able to unambiguously identify instances of each (and then analyze their uses and see the parallelisms). And that will mean having the sort of conceptual clarification that the present paper puts aside.

I think there's a much better defense available (of the paper's way of proceeding). And I want to recommend it not simply as a way of framing this particular paper, but also as a way of thinking about the larger project of understanding dissociation. Briefly put, I want to suggest that dissociation be approached as what the sociologist Herbert Blumer called a "sensitizing concept" (as opposed to a "definitive concept"; see Blumer 1969). A sensitizing concept is not perfectly well-articulated in advance; that is, (unlike definitive concepts) there is not some definitive set of attributes that permits unambiguous identification of instances of the concept. Instead, a

sensitizing concept is a more open-ended device that provides general guidance in approaching individual empirical cases.

That a concept is sensitizing (rather than definitive) is not an intrinsic defect, and does not prevent useful application and exploration of the concept. On the contrary, a sensitizing concept can be quite useful in orienting one to aspects of the phenomena under investigation. (An aside: Of course, as suggested by Waismann's notion of "open texture," all empirical concepts are "sensitizing" in that there is always a possibility of some case arising in which application of the concept is not clear. Blumer's point is perhaps best understood as encouraging recognition of this feature of concepts, and especially sociological concepts.)

What sensitizing concepts invite is a reciprocal process between concept and observation in which there is progressive refinement of the conceptual framework so as to achieve better articulation with the observations being made (and hence better understanding of the phenomena of interest). Careful examination of a variety of individual observations—examined through the lens of the sensitizing concept—thus provides the mechanism for more adequate conceptual articulation.

Approached from this angle, van Rees's paper does not "leave the matter of conceptual clarification aside"—just the opposite. It contributes to the emerging clarification of dissociation in a very direct and important way, precisely by identifying and analyzing a set of instances involving dissociation-related phenomena. By collecting and thinking about a raft of dissociation cases (or dissociation-related cases), we can make progress in getting our analytical frameworks to articulate with and illuminate the phenomena under study.

I want to attempt to extend the discussion further, by considering a few more cases of dissociation—or (more carefully) dissociation-like phenomena—with an eye to getting a better picture of the conceptual landscape. Some of these will, I hope, seem rather far removed from the sorts of instances that van Rees discusses—and yet (I think) they are nevertheless related. So I am not committed to the claim that all of these are examples of dissociation, or even to the claim that they are all examples of exactly the same thing (whether "dissociation" or something else). But they all seem to me to represent phenomena that are related to one another, and to the phenomena often collected under the heading of dissociation. And hence they are offered in the spirit of cooperative conceptual exploration. To be clear: There is not some set of objects out there that is really named "dissociation." That is, the task here is not one of trying to figure out the correct application of the word (nor is it one of trying to discern the intentions of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca). There's a set of argumentative phenomena here that we want to describe in useful ways, and the task is to somehow evolve a conceptual framework that provides such descriptions.

Perhaps a useful place to start is with van Rees's observation that "dissociation is a move which brings the discussion back to the opening stage." Dissociation does this because it amounts to providing a clarification of the claim under discussion [as in van Rees's examples (1) and (9): "I am not claiming that he made a 'fraudulent declaration' in the strictly legal sense of the term, but rather that he made a fraudulent declaration in a non-technical sense of the term" or "I'm not claiming he's a good crisis manager, only that he's a good general manager"].

Now van Rees's paper focuses (though not exclusively) on what might be thought of as reactive uses of dissociation. Indeed, the paper calls dissociation "a typically dialogical technique," one that is "always used in reaction to the standpoint or argument of another party."

So, for instance, in van Rees's example (9), having asserted that a person is a good manager but faced with the subsequent objection that the person couldn't prevent a subsidy cut-off, the arguer employs dissociation in order to evade the opponent's objection ("yes, he isn't a good crisis manager, but as a general manager he's just fine").

But presumably anything that involves differentiating one's view from something that might seem similar is likely to somehow be related to dissociation. (Indeed, thought of sufficiently broadly, dissociation is implicitly involved in any articulation of a claim.) This implies that dissociation techniques might be invoked preemptively, that is, done at the outset of a discussion (or in a monologue format). Such use of dissociation would be represented by cases in which, before any dialogical engagement, an arguer distinguishes the claim being advanced (or some element of the argumentation) from some alternative claim.

It is easy enough to imagine modified versions of some of van Rees's examples, modified so as to make the dissociation pre-emptive rather than reactive. So, for example, instead of waiting for the interlocutor to object that the manager couldn't prevent the subsidy cut-off, the arguer might have pre-empted such a criticism by saying "he's a good manager generally—not in a crisis, perhaps, but generally he's pretty good." (Or look back a few paragraphs: "I am not committed to the claim that all of these are examples of dissociation.")

But even pre-emptive use of dissociation might properly be said to be one in which dissociation is "used in reaction to the standpoint or argument of another party"—it's just that here the opposing argument hasn't yet been made. The arguer has anticipated a certain sort of criticism (or misunderstanding) and—to prevent that criticism (or misunderstanding) from arising—offers some clarification at the outset. That is to say, dissociation seems to be a technique that reflects the arguer's sensitivity to criticism (whether actual or potential), and a desire to avoid criticism through clarification.

Pre-emptive dissociation thus may be seen as related to (what have been called) "disclaimers," linguistic devices used to ward off the negative implications of an impending action or statement (Weinstein 1966). For example, a speaker might preface a criticism or insult by saying "Don't take this the wrong way, but . . ." (e.g., "Don't take this the wrong way, but that tie doesn't go with that shirt"). Or, prior to engaging in a performance that the speaker expects to be poor, the speaker might downgrade the speaker's ability in the hope that observers will not apply stringent evaluative criteria to the performance ("I'm really not a very good bowler" or "it's been a long time since I've been bowling"). Or a speaker might preface a plainly prejudiced remark by saying "I'm not prejudiced, but . . ." (or "Some of my best friends are . . .").

Disclaimers seek to disentangle the evaluation of the action and the evaluation of the actor. The actor hopes to be able to engage in a negative act (making an insult, uttering a prejudiced remark) without having that negative evaluation applied to the actor. Put more broadly, these all are ways of attempting to frame the subsequent event for observers, to influence the understanding of the event (and, particularly, the speaker) by setting the audience's frame of mind in a certain way. And presumably pre-emptive dissociation works in similar sorts of ways.

And so now consider something like the case of a political candidate who campaigns as being (say) a "compassionate conservative." It is easy enough to see that distinguishing "compassionate conservatives" from "those other (non-compassionate) conservatives" provides a way of framing things for the audience—and perhaps providing the candidate with some degree of insulation from anticipated lines of attack.

Of course, rather than engaging in pre-emptive dissociation, an arguer might instead prefer strategic ambiguity, that is, might purposefully fail to distinguish alternative possible understandings (even though the speaker foresees the potential for alternative interpretations). Imagine a narrow-minded person's saying "Homosexuality is abnormal," and then—in the face of criticism—responding "I meant only that it is statistically not the norm; I meant that most people are heterosexual. I didn't mean that homosexuality is morally or medically abnormal." But (in this imagined case) of course the speaker would have been perfectly happy if hearers had taken it in such non-statistical ways. (One way of putting what happens here: The speaker makes a dubious assertion, perhaps hoping it will go unchallenged; but if the assertion *is* challenged, then the speaker retreats to a different reading—a different interpretation—of the statement so as to make it more defensible. Notice that this may be akin to van Rees's example in which an arguer said, in effect, "Oh, I just meant that *non-technically* it was a fraudulent declaration—I didn't mean that *technically* it was fraudulent.")

This sort of case, in turn, ought to be seen as related to those in which someone says something objectionable (e.g., offensive), and when criticized offers a defense by saying "I was only joking." In both cases, a speaker does something that might go unchallenged, but if challenged then the speaker pursues some alternative interpretation—an alternative interpretation of some part of the utterance ("I meant 'abnormal' statistically," "I meant 'fraudulent declaration' non-technically") or of the utterance as a whole ("It was a joke").

Or, relatedly: consider the circumstance in which an actor wants something from another person, but doesn't want to come right out and ask for it. A common strategy here is to drop hints (and so to perform the request "off-record," to use the terminology of Brown and Levinson's analysis of politeness; Brown and Levinson 1987). If the other person hears it as a request and grants it, then the actor gets the thing requested (and without having to actually ask for it). If the other person doesn't hear it as a request, then even though the actor doesn't get the thing requested, nevertheless the actor hasn't suffered any loss of face by having an explicit request denied. And if the other person hears it as a request and denies it, the actor can say "But I wasn't asking" (and thereby not suffer the negative consequences of having had a request refused). That is, the speaker recognizes (at least implicitly) the ambiguity of the initial utterance (in this case, the hint) and—if the situation requires it—is prepared to disambiguate the utterance strategically ("Oh, no, I wasn't asking").

Now obviously speakers, in engaging in dissociation (whether reactively or preemptively), are trying to insulate themselves from various negative outcomes (such as criticism, loss of face, and so forth). Van Rees's treatment suggests that commonly the primary motivation for dissociation is achieving consistency (or avoiding inconsistency); dissociation is said to aim at "protecting the speaker against an accusation of inconsistency." So, for instance, in the Schiphol example, the minister says, in effect, "I know I previously said 'no tolerance for violations,' but I'm not acting inconsistently with that statement because this is something different." The various examples discussed here suggest that the desire to be consistent—or to be seen as being consistent—might perhaps be usefully thought of as part of a larger motivational structure in interaction, that of wanting to project and maintain a favorably-received image of self (positive face; Brown & Levinson 1987).

I hope readers will think that we have traveled quite some distance from van Rees's examples to the ones discussed here—and yet plainly there are connecting threads. Obviously, sorting out the nature of dissociation is going to take quite a bit of work. But van Rees has

provided us with an excellent beginning, and we may hope that the subject will receive her continuing attentions.

### ***References***

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